

## **Preliminary exploration of online social support among adults with asthma**

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### **Abstract**

**OBJECTIVE:** Evaluate the qualitative and quantitative differences between moderated and unmoderated on-line social support groups focused on asthma. **DESIGN:** A retrospective study of a single months duration of Internet postings to four public on-line support groups focused on asthma. **MEASUREMENT:** Content analysis of random set of messages.

**RESULTS:** Preliminary data indicate a quantitative and qualitative difference between moderated and unmoderated groups. Patterns of differences point to variations in the content of messages and the types of social support sought and provided.

### **Background**

Inappropriate or non-use of appropriate asthma medications is wide spread. It is estimated that from 10% to 46% of asthma patients do not adhere to their prescribed medication regimen (1-2). The consequences lead to increased morbidity and mortality. The self-management of asthma is enhanced through interpersonal relationships and support from family, friends, peers, and health providers. This kind of care is referred to as social support. Research findings suggest that social support is also advantageous for promoting medication regimen adherence (3). Social support has shown to play a role in asthma care by reducing the sense of powerlessness caused by asthma (5) and facilitating treatment adherence (4).

One recent addition to the resources available to individuals for social support is online support groups – self-help virtual communities. Technologically, online support groups are generally automated Internet-based computer systems that receive, organize, and distribute email messages (posts) from its members. Contextually, online support groups are found in the domain of cyberspace on Internet newsgroups, commercial information networks, commercial and not-for-profit health sites, listservs, and bulletin boards. Even though online support groups are not conducted in-person, they still provide a forum for sharing of common interests and experiences. Transactional social support is available whether sought in face-to-face encounters or online (6).

Little research has been conducted to explore the effects of online support groups on health outcomes, the unique characteristics of online support groups focused on asthma, or the qualitative differences between hosted and non-hosted groups. Findings from such research could benefit health professionals, health educators, computer systems designers, health system administrators, and others concerned with the care, management, and quality of life of people with asthma.

### **Methods**

Using a conceptual framework, the Theory of Online Social Support (7), and a taxonomy of social support categories (8), a sample of messages from each of four online asthma support groups were qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed. Two groups were not hosted, while a health professional hosted the other two groups.

### **Results**

Preliminary findings suggest a positive effect on adherence related to participation in online support groups for adults with asthma as well as a qualitative difference in messages posted to hosted and non-hosted groups.

### **References**

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